

Testimony on Senate Bill # 207: An Act Concerning Recent Increases in Hunting and Fishing Licenses and Amending Certain Motor Vehicle Fines.
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I am here today to **strongly support the concept of Senate Bill 207: An Act Concerning Recent Increases in Hunting and Fishing Licenses and Amending Certain Motor Vehicle Fines.** This bill would develop a more reasonable fee structure for Connecticut's recreational sportsmen, thereby enhancing the state's natural resources.

With more than 30 years of experience in the wildlife profession, I am acutely aware that license and permit fees paid by recreational fishermen and hunters in combination with federal excise taxes generated by these same constituents represent nearly all of the revenue devoted to Connecticut's fish and wildlife, including nongame species. For nearly a century, this "user-pay" model has been enormously successful in generating predictable annual budgets that have been used to restore and manage many of our wildlife species.

However, in the face of an aging sportsmen demographic and broadening wildlife-related mandates, natural resource agencies across the United States have identified two steps that need to be taken to sustain wildlife programs and their funding:

1. Increase efforts to recruit and retain sportsmen.
2. Broaden the sportsmen conservation model by developing mechanisms to include additional "user-pay" constituents.

Shockingly, by doubling sportsmen's fees and eliminating the Conservation Fund and other dedicated wildlife funds during the 2009 Session, the General Assembly has taken steps in the exact opposite direction and dealt wildlife conservation a crippling blow. Immediate corrective legislation is required and S.B. 207 is a good starting point.

The 100% fee increase adopted in 2009 is simply indefensible. The increase has created a fee structure so disproportionate to other states (many of which offer superior hunting and angling opportunities) that it will greatly accelerate the decline in participation in hunting and fishing in Connecticut. Many individuals will choose to hunt or fish out of state or greatly curtail the type and number of permits they purchase here. As such, the 100% fee increase is a money loser rather than a revenue gainer. And it represents a serious impediment to youths, families and the next generation of conservation-supporting sportsmen. It has dire consequences for the future funding of wildlife programs.

A 20-25% increase in fees (over 2008 levels) would be more acceptable and would result in a lower attrition rate of sportsmen. In fact, the attrition rate created by the 100% increase passed in 2009 would likely be so high that it would generate less total revenue than the fee structure proposed in S.B. 207. As such, rolling back the fee increase to 20-25% should be viewed as a revenue-neutral change with the added advantage of retaining more sportsmen. Therefore, I question whether the reduction in sportsmen's fees needs to be offset by an increase in motor vehicle fines.

In reviewing the language of S.B. 207 I noted some inconsistencies in the proposed new fees indicating that some fine-tuning is required. **I would suggest that the Legislature allow the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to have input on the dollar value of the various licenses, tags and permits addressed in the bill. Staff at DEP has expertise and knowledge that would be invaluable in establishing reasonable costs.**

Despite many resounding successes in restoring individual species over the past century, much of Connecticut's wildlife and its habitats are imperiled. If we are truly serious about preserving the state's biodiversity, we need to learn from the past. Wise land use, habitat protection and science-based management consistently funded and practiced is the recipe for success. Rather than pricing sportsmen out of the equation, we need to make a concerted effort to retain them while recruiting other constituents to strengthen and broaden the user-pay model.

I am also very concerned that many of the dedicated funds that were established to benefit wildlife have been swept to the General Fund. Many of these accounts (wildlife license plate, duck stamp, wildlife income tax checkoff, marine fishing license) were created at the request of those paying in. The loss of these funds is a strong disincentive to any future citizen-supported initiatives.

For decades, Connecticut has been over-reliant on sportsmen to fund wildlife programs that benefit everyone. Until a new mechanism is developed that will provide consistent and predictable funding, it is critical that we retain the revenue generated by sportsmen. Adopting a fairer and more reasonable sportsmen's fee structure and restoring the wildlife-dedicated accounts will not deepen the State's deficit. However, they are necessary actions that must be taken by the Legislature this year to retain the funding base for Connecticut's wildlife programs.